

Synopsis of DLA Doctoral thesis

Klára Bábel

The Harp in the Orchestral Works of Béla
Bartók: A Performer's Analysis

Supervisor: László Tihanyi

Liszt Academy

Doctoral School No 28 of Art and Cultural History

Budapest

2023

I. Background to the research

The harp played an important role in Bartók's orchestration; its timbre, harmonic character, as well as the rhythmic role of the part are all evident in his orchestral works. We learn not only about the instrument's unique sound, but also about its role in instrumental groups. Although the literature on Bartók's works is vast, there are significantly fewer sources on the composer's orchestration. In György Kroó's book *Bartók's Stage Works*, we can learn in detail about the orchestral process evolving parallel with the plot, and about the role of the instruments. In his *18 Bartók studies*, László Somfai provides an exhaustive analysis of the *Violin Concerto*, while Ernő Lendvai's books analyzing Bartók's compositions also trace the occurrences of instruments.

In my orchestral work I have participated in many performances of Bartók's works, and in practicing them I have found that in many cases it is necessary to rethink the part from the harpist's point of view. I have encountered two problems on the way to this point: firstly, although I have always felt it my task to play the part as Bartók composed it, this has not always proved possible. The other problem was that on several occasions I heard different ways of performing the same passage. These issues have motivated the search for a unified solution, whereby the parts are performed in a way that best fits the score, but also meet my expectations. The principle is based on playing all the notes in the score.

II. Sources

I felt that my first task was to collate the parts with the composer's manuscripts, because, unfortunately, my experience showed that they were often incorrect. There are also discrepancies between the various editions, manuscripts, copies, printer's copies, and fair copies. Thus, only a comparison of the manuscript and the printed edition could provide certain and satisfactory information. I have compared the edition in question with the *autograph* sources and interpreted the discrepancies in a tabular form, which may help in an accurate and authentic presentation. In the tables I have given the numbers of the archival *autograph* sources, which are also given in the Appendix of László Somfai's volume titled *Béla Bartók's Method of Composition*.

Anikó Vászka's PhD thesis *Orchestration in Bartók's Composers' Workshop: the Expression of Instrumental Individualities in Orchestral Works* (2023) is important in this context, as she not only repeatedly discusses the function of the harp, but also devotes a whole chapter to the use of the instrument.

György Kroó's book *Bartók's Guide* helped me to find my way around the orchestration of the works. In addition to György Kroó's *Bartók's Stage Works*, Ernő Lendvai's *Bartók and Kodály's World of Harmony*, *Bartók's Dramaturgy*, *Bartók's Poetics* and *Bartók's Style* helped me understand Bartók's compositional thinking, and Bartók harmonic system and harmonic world.

III. Methods

After obtaining the sheet music and scores, I played through all of Bartók's works for harp and selected the parts that I felt I might have trouble playing. During my research I wanted to record all the differences, since, even though some of them do not play a significant role in the technical realization of the part, their significance is of course unquestionable.

In the vast majority of cases, it is the dynamics and accidentals that are missing, but there are also notation errors. Some of the problems can be solved, but from the point of view of elaboration I have also looked at any other parts where the performer may have difficulty or where the part needed to be rewritten more thoroughly taking into account the instrument's specific capabilities.

After I had familiarized myself with all the parts, I examined the scores and analyzed the harp parts. The role of the one or two harp parts in the orchestra can be associated with different instrumental groups, and this is what I have investigated and analyzed in my thesis. In the stage works, I examined the text, the plot, the characters, and the scenes, since the appearances of the harp are often linked to the character, indicating changes in mood or content.

IV. Results

In every place where the harpist may encounter a technical difficulty, they will find the solution I consider the best, with explanation and notation. The tables in the Appendix show the differences between the *autograph* and published sheet music.

The analyses point to Bartók's usage of harp techniques, since the task of the instrument is not only to unfold harmony, but also to play a significant coloring and rhythmic role. Sometimes it prepares the introduction of another part, at other times it rounds off melodic arcs. It also determines the opening harmonies and lilt of the movements. It is an important partner in all instrumental groups, but mainly complements the keyboard parts of the piano and the celeste, which are closer in sound to it. It also appears together with strings and woodwinds, and sometimes intertwines with the percussion group.

My thesis also points out that the instrument's part also contains whole-tone glissandos, chords and harmonies derived from the acoustic sound system, which are stylistic features of Bartók's axial tonal thinking.

Sometimes the harp appears as a folkish drone, sometimes the composer gives it a percussion-like role. Its timbre ranges widely, sometimes complementing the high woodwinds and strings, or, on the contrary, it is associated with the dramatic sound of the low strings and brass.

V. Documentation of activities related to the subject of the thesis

I have been playing with symphony orchestras for almost twenty years, so I have had the opportunity to play Bartók's compositions on several occasions. Currently, I have been a harpist with the Hungarian Radio Arts Ensembles for thirteen years, and every year I am able to participate in more and more Bartók works, most of which are recorded by Bartók Radio.

2017. 09. 16.

Hungarian Radio Symphony Orchestra

Liszt Academy

Violin Concerto, BB 117

Conductor: János Kovács

2018. 03. 13.

Hungarian Radio Symphony Orchestra

Müpa Budapest

Kossuth, a Symphonic Poem for Orchestra, BB 31

Conductor: János Kovács

2021. 09. 21.

Hungarian Radio Symphony Orchestra

George Enescu Festival, Bucharest

The Miraculous Mandarin – Suite, BB 82

Conductor: Christian Badea

2021. 10. 01.

Hungarian Radio Symphony Orchestra

Italian Institute, Budapest

Three Hungarian Pictures, BB 103

Conductor: Tamás Vásáry

2022. 09. 26.

Hungarian Radio Symphony Orchestra

Liszt Academy

Scherzo for Piano and Orchestra, BB 35

Dance Suite, BB 86

Conductor: János Kovács

2023. 01. 11.

Hungarian Radio Symphony Orchestra

Liszt Academy

Concerto for Orchestra, BB 123

Conductor: Gergely Vajda